

Finding our Place at the Table
Rev. Jonathan Morgan
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Luke 14:1, 7-14
October 4, 2015

This morning, I learned that some townspeople of Roseburg, when they are interviewed, have decided they will not mention the name of the 26 year old man who caused such havoc and bloodshed in their community. They don't want to honor his wish to be known for his heinous acts and they don't want to encourage others to seek notoriety by doing something just as evil... or worse. So, they will only refer to the young man as *the shooter*.

I understand, and I can't blame them. No one wants to encourage another person with rage in their soul to act on their deranged desire for attention. One cannot oversimplify the complex and tragic series of events that would lead one to commit an act so terrible. It causes one to feel overwhelmed when asked the question, "How can we keep this from ever happening again?"

There is much we *can* do. Surely, the issues of inadequate mental health care and the predominance of gun violence in this country must be addressed. We just need the courage of our convictions to begin.

As a community of faith, we can begin by very consciously *not* adding a link to the chain of disenfranchisement that supports and exacerbates fear and mental illness. For although there are only very few who seek attention through twisted rage, there are many who feel completely alone, shut off, unworthy, totally forgotten in this world.

Who feels nameless?

How can we make a difference in those lives I wonder? How might we make this world a better place? I think our faith has an answer worth considering.

Let us pray...

What does it feel like to be considered unworthy of recognition or care from others?

- Have you ever felt unrecognized, ignored, or even seen as a second class citizen?
- The staff member on the lowest rung of the corporate ladder?
- The professor who lacks just the right credentials to ever be mentioned with the elite?
- The sibling with talents that are a bit hidden.
- Or perhaps you just can't do anything special that allows you to stand out while surrounded by fellow students who seem to do everything well and with remarkable was

It is so painful and isolating when we feel **LESS THAN**. Yet, it happens all the time. It is part of the human condition.

What can we do about this as people of faith?

As we've heard, Jesus had a lot to say about this issue by using the example of the seating arrangements at the table. Our gospel story finds him attending a Sabbath meal at the home of one of the Pharisee's leaders when he takes notice of how the guests are choosing their seats. Some come in hesitantly and choose seats on the far ends, knowing that those who are more important will expect to have the seats closest to the host. Others come in confidently and take seats right next to the host, believing that no one else in attendance will outrank them in importance, and even if someone does, this is a way to usurp that power by claiming it as their own. I imagine that others still were reluctant to choose any seat until all the guests had arrived. Choosing instead to mill about with their drinks in hand waiting to see how everyone else sorts themselves out.

As evolved as we've become as a species, we're not very far from our primate predecessors who arranged their social structure according to body size, power, and ability to intimidate. In a world where resources are limited and controlled by a very few, it's natural that there is a constant jockeying for position amongst those who want access to those resources.

The table has always been a scene of such contention. I can imagine Jesus making the same observations in our time, at wedding receptions, political fundraisers, and even in our school cafeterias, where it doesn't take much of an observing eye to sort out who has the seats of honor, and who does not. When it comes to power struggles, a Pharisee banquet has nothing on a middle school lunch period.

What we learn from this gospel passage is that God expects more from us.

God encourages us to put our egos and our own desires for recognition and power aside, and to humble ourselves in each other's presence. We are encouraged to spend less time and energy trying to create or preserve our reputation so that we might train our thoughts and resources into making a difference in the lives of others. Jesus calls us to keep our pride and our egos in check; *to love kindness, to act justly, and to walk humbly with our God.*

As with many things that Jesus asks of us, this is very hard to do. The world we live in is full of striations, delineations, and hierarchical organizations that force us to rank people according to an increasing and decreasing scale of importance. We all have somebody above us, and we all have somebody below us, and attempting to transpose our Christian values of equality on a system that is built on inequality is fraught with difficulties.

However, it can be done:

- By taking that lower seat we lift someone else up.
- By inviting the marginalized to the banquet, we show hospitality to the disenfranchised.
- By making room for the once silent voices — all will be heard.

You see, Jesus was trying to help us envision a new and better world. Where the marginalized will be embraced, the forgotten recognized, and everyone will know that he or she is a beloved child of God.

Let's try this challenge in the coming week; *let us try to relate to every person, even those we meet for a short time, as if they embody the Spirit of Jesus in our midst.* Can we do that? How might that change our perspective?

You never know... We may encounter Christ in the 16-year-old store clerk who is not skilled or knowledgeable enough to serve us in the way that we're accustomed to being served. Or in the woman that we choose not to befriend because she wears a blue collar to work, rather than white. Or in the man we see shopping at Walmart who has too many kids in our mind, is committing too many fashion faux pas, and whose cart is too full of junk food for our liking. We may strain to see Christ in someone who doesn't fit our image of where God might choose to dwell.

God is there nonetheless.

Because God dwells in the heart of each one of us. Despite our faults and our foibles, despite the fact that we can be egotistical, judgmental, and downright nasty to each other at times. God loves us and works through us even when we're at our worst. God knows what we're capable of when we're at our best.

This Sunday, as we celebrate with Christians around the world who gather at the open table where the love of Jesus will be made known, let us open our lives to the gift of this grace-filled gesture. How might we touch the hearts of others who feel *LESS THAN*? How might their lives be changed if they know that we are cherished and *named* a beloved child of God? How might we become the church of radical embrace in the coming days and how might this hurting world be healed when we do?

Let's find out together!

Amen.

Luke 14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘‘Give this person your place’’, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘‘Friend, move up higher’’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed...